

O.M.I. MISSIONS JUIN - JUNE 1970

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## **Brother O'Regan - student counsellor**

BY KAY CRONIN

An Oblate Brother who is filling a key role in Indian education in British Columbia is Brother Orland O'Regan, student counsellor at the Cariboo Indian Residence near Williams Lake.

While Brother's job is similar in some respects to that of a regular school counsellor, his work is more in the nature of a private tutor and trouble-shooter for some 150 Indian students in Grades 4 to 12 who live at the residence.

The position of a student counsellor at an Indian Student Residence in B.C. is a new one. Its purpose is to counteract the alarming drop-out rate of Indian students who, in line with the federal government's all-out integration policy, are required to attend local public schools. The job is therefore a very specialized one which calls for someone who is not only an experienced teacher and counsellor, but who is also deeply sensitive to the needs and aspirations of Indian youth.

And on these counts, Brother O'Regan is ideally suited to the task.

He has been a teacher for 21 years, 18 of which have been spent in Indian schools. It was after teaching for three years in his home town of Joggins and in Rockingham, Nova Scotia, that Brother decided to come west to British Columbia in search of a more challenging teaching position. He soon found one at the day school on the Kyuquot reserve on the west coast of Vancouver Island where he taught for four years. Wishing to broaden his experience and to avoid becoming «bushed», he then joined the teaching staff at Kamloops Indian Residential School. After being at Kamloops a short time, he decided to enter the Oblate brotherhood. Following his postulancy and novitiate in Ottawa he returned to his teaching position at Kamloops as a Brother. He has his B.A. degree, majoring in socials, also his B.Ed., and is currently close to completing his Master's Degree in counselling.

It was towards the end of his ten year stay at Kamloops that Brother O'Regan was invited by the Indian Affairs Branch to teach a special Grade 10 Occupational class composed of some 20 students in a catch-all category — ex-inmates of correctional institutions, students with discipline problems, unwed mothers, school dropouts and so on. Brother was asked to set up his own curriculum for these students, who ranged in age from 14 to 25. He now considers that year to have been the most interesting and satisfying he has ever experienced. And of all the Indian students who have kept in touch with him over the years, none have stayed closer to him than the members of that class.

In 1965 Brother was transferred to the Cariboo Indian School where students attending schools in Williams Lake were experiencing major difficulties. Here Brother was asked to devote most of his time to special

coaching of the students and liaison work with the public school teachers, spending only a few hours each week on formal teaching.

So marked was the progress of these students that during the past year Brother has done no formal teaching at all and has concentrated entirely on the counselling aspects of his work. As was the case in Kamloops, the Indian Affairs Branch gives him a free hand in developing a program best suited to serve the needs of the students.

Officially, Brother's day is supposed to begin when the students return home from school in the afternoon. Unofficially, however, his day goes from early morning till late at night. Most mornings find him in Williams Lake by nine o'clock conferring with teachers at one or other of the four public schools which the Indian students attend — two elementary, one junior high and one senior high. He often consults with as many as 25 teachers a day during their free periods, discussing every Indian student in their classes. This keeps him busy until around 3 p.m. when he returns to the residence to prepare for the students' afternoon and evening study periods.

Interviewed recently, Brother O'Regan made the following observations concerning his unique role as student counsellor at the residence.

*On the need for special counsellors at student residences:*

"I can see a definite need for it, especially in this area. By comparison with the students at Kamloops, they're at least 25 years behind up here. I believe the Kamloops students could study pretty well on their own. They're forward enough to go and say to a teacher, 'I don't understand — can you give me

some extra help?' Ours wouldn't think of doing that, not the average student anyway. We might have one or two out of the hundred and fifty who might ask for help, but the majority have to be pushed. We have very few who can handle the academic program, yet you can't expect the teachers in town to let them off with their assignments or show them any favouritism, especially since there is a bit of friction between Indian and white students. So I couldn't imagine this group persevering or trying to mix without this push and shove, and my going in and paving the way a bit for them in town."

*On relations between Indian and white students:*

"Certainly relations aren't all that good between Indian and white students — especially at the junior high school. In a questionnaire I gave the students, about 90% admitted that they enjoyed the school in town because they realized they had a wider choice of teachers, more equipment, and, so on, and for integration purposes as such. But at the same time, 58 out of the 75 admitted they have had trouble with white students calling them a variety of four-letter words, "Dirty Squaws", "Dirty Indians", and the like; the girls especially complain about this. There have been one or two actual fist fights between the two. And I notice when I'm in the schools that they do not mix. You would never see an Indian and white student going down the hall together. But then, seldom here do you see a Shuswap and Chilcotin together. I find this is our biggest problem right here — getting the two Indian groups to mix. I would think we have more fighting going on right here between these two groups than you have in town between Indians and Whites. Perhaps it is that when they're in town a common enemy hauls them together "

*On special coaching:*

"The first study group is from 4:30 to 6 p.m. and in that group we'll have Grade 6 and 7, sometimes some from Grades 8 and 9 who are behind and have to come to both afternoon and evening study periods. Through contact with the teachers in town, either personally or by phone, I know that this student should get more reading, that one should do a bit of work on spelling, someone else should read up on a particular subject in socials while others may have problems in math. If there are three or four in one group who need the same help, we'll put them in another empty classroom. Sister Ethel Devlin usually comes too, at this time, to give some help. Maybe she'll take the math, or she'll take some other group, and I'll take an English group, or whatever. This is more of a baby-sitting group, the first group. There's not too much real teaching. The next group starts at 6:30 and with that group I go through till 10 p.m. if necessary, depending on assignments. There are some 70 students in this group and here there's most contact with teachers because in this group there are more assignments. Some may be having trouble with an English essay; some may want information — where to look up a certain topic. Others will have taken notes from a film they have seen but haven't a clue as to what they have down in their notes. I can't really help them because I haven't seen the film. But I try to get them to talk about it. I don't always get too much from them, but I'll get a group who have seen the film and we try to thrash it out and get the idea of what the teacher wants from them. By this time there could be some lined up with their hands up, waiting for help. With many, it's just something they don't understand and all I have to do is read the sentence to them and re-word it. For instance, the teacher gives them a question. 'Mountains tend to do what to the climate?' That word 'tend' throws them

they haven't a clue what this is. So you explain it and that's all they need, they're away. Others will be waiting. Usually, if they're stuck they won't go on with another subject, they'll just wait till you're free. So you have to be able to spot this type of student and say: 'Go on with such-and-such till I get time to help you.' Some nights, even with Sister's help, it's quite high pressure. For instance, Grade Nine - 7 have an assignment, Nine - 8 have one, Nine - 9, Nine - 5, and so on. They're all Grade Nines, but all have different subjects that night. Sometimes we can end up with about 16 groups — sixteen grades, really."

*The most difficult subjects.*

"English and Socials — they have quite a bit of difficulty with these two. In fact we have about half our students failing English right through high school and almost half failing in Socials. These are the two main ones. English — because many of them are from the Chilcotin area where they mightn't learn English till they come to school, and still speak Indian among themselves. They find it very hard to express themselves and the hardest thing of all for them in an English assignment is to read something and to pull out the gist from it. They will copy sentences direct that are disjointed and they try to make a paragraph with a sentence pulled out here and there with no relationship at all. This is one reason, when they are asked to do anything like this on a test, they're pretty well lost.

"In Socials — their little world is mostly this area. To over half of them, Vancouver is another world altogether. Even though they have maps and they've worked with globes and the tools of geography and history, they still find it very difficult to imagine that the world is so big. And I don't think they have much

interest in the rest of the world anyway. I don't think they get the desire to go places and see things that a white child their age would. For instance, you could have everything lined up for them to go on an educational trip to Europe tomorrow to visit places they have studied about in their Socials class, but if there was a rodeo at Bull Canyon tonight, they wouldn't be at all interested in what's happening tomorrow. If they had to choose, they would go to the rodeo."

*Teachers' attitude towards Indian students:*

"I find that the teachers here in town are very interested. They want to do whatever they can to draw the best from our students. They'll give up their noon hours, ask students to come back for help, and so on. I think you could say that the majority are really there to help our kids. And I find the counsellors very, very good. They'll phone if anything seems to be wrong, or they want to know if you can give them some help; — they haven't a clue what this is. So you explain it maybe they have a mystery they'd like cleared up if you can shed any light on it. I just find them very interested. I think perhaps more than we in the Indian schools like to admit. I remember when integration was first mentioned — I'm thinking now of Kamloops — most of the teachers, including myself, thought, well, they'll never be able to do as much as we've been doing; they're not going to put in all the extra hours we do. But I think some of the teachers here in Williams Lake could put some of our own teachers to shame. I know that some of them have invited our students to their homes for weekends; they've taken them out for trips; they have a field club which is almost three-quarter Indian students. In other words they're willing to meet the students outside the classroom when it's a boy and adult relationship, not a student-teacher relationship".



*Greatest need for teachers:*

"I think that what the teachers find most helpful is to be able to gain some insight into the background and culture of the Indian students. I consider the four years that I taught on the reserve, and lived as the Indians did on the west coast, has been my greatest help personally as a counsellor. You could teach a hundred years in a residential set-up and never be aware of reserve conditions. So without breaking any confidences with the students, I think you can generalize enough in talking to the teachers. Once they know the background of a particular student and how his set of values differs from theirs, they can better understand how that student will react to various situations in the classroom".

*Parent involvement:*

"The parents up here have very little academic education. They want their children to be educated, but when it comes to taking an active part, their reaction is, 'Well, I don't know; he knows more than I do already'. So how can you expect them to know whether their child should 'go academic' or get into one of the 'vocational streams'? This is all foreign to them. Sometimes I get frustrated that the parents don't take a more active part, but then, how can they? Only when these children get out and have families of their own can you expect parent involvement. When the parents have gone to high school themselves, as many have in Kamloops, then you get a very different reaction. They're just as concerned and involved as any other parents".

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